

A BEIJING +5 SUCCESS STORY: WOMEN FROM EASTERN EUROPE STRENGTHENING THEIR DEMOCRACY SKILLS

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"It is not only important for donors to obtain an evaluation on their investment and expenses, but also for us as a collective NGO (the Committee) and as individual activists to see that our kind of work helps to empower women, helps to create more awareness on the nexus of rights and responsibilities, of citizen and government relationships, and thus contributes to more democracy-building."

*Renate Bloem, President of the
NGO Committee on the Status of Women; and
Danielle Bridel, Chairperson of the NGO
Working Group on Women in the ECE*

As the worldwide review of implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action concluded in June 2000 (Beijing +5), women's rights advocates were disappointed by the U.N. General Assembly's failure to produce a powerful statement that renewed members' commitments, priorities, and benchmarks for monitoring progress. Nevertheless, the process produced other accomplishments. One positive result that is rarely acknowledged is the "on the job" experience in democratic processes women gained from their participation. Through more than six months of collaboration by the USAID Office of Women in Development with women from Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans (CEE), WIDTECH was able to witness and applaud the ways in which women from that region became stronger democratic leaders and constituents.

THE PURPOSE OF BEIJING +5

At the 1995 U.N. World Conference on Women in Beijing, member states made commitments to a Platform for Action to ensure that women around the world could exercise a full range of basic rights.

In many respects, achieving such government promises was a phenomenal accomplishment. Yet, in recent years, citizens around the world have learned critical lessons of

democracy: that words and promises are of little value without implementation, that implementation requires political will and resources, and that political will and resources depend on constituency pressure. Thus, women's nongovernmental organizations lobbied for a five-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action and for the U.N. General Assembly to hold a Special Session to assess implementation, renew commitments, and set new benchmarks.

PLATFORM FOR ACTION: 12 AREAS OF CONCERN

Poverty	Decision Making
Education and Training	Institutional Mechanisms
Health	Human Rights
Violence	Media
Armed Conflict	Environment
Economy	The Girl Child

The Beijing +5 review process took nearly a year leading up to the Special Session of the U.N. General Assembly in June 2000. The process included a questionnaire sent by the United Nations to member states, official progress reports submitted by member states, alternative reports submitted by NGOs, and regional and thematic preparatory conferences. Although member states sought to demonstrate their achievements, the NGO community from CEE focused on what is needed next: (1) areas for improvement, such as the need for more resources; (2) new issues since 1995, such as the impacts of globalization, privatization, and conflict in the Balkans, that require attention; and (3) benchmarks by which to measure progress in the coming years.

Many of the women from CEE took part in Beijing +5 as members of a regional network, the KARAT Coalition. The idea of a CEE women's rights coalition started en route to the Beijing Conference in 1995. The "Beijing Express" was a train purposely organized to pick up NGO

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participants on the way from Warsaw to Beijing as a means of providing a preliminary setting for them to begin making contacts, comparing agendas, and developing plans. At the Beijing Conference, the women from CEE further discussed the need to create a regional coalition during the Huarirou Forum. They formally launched the KARAT Coalition on February 1, 1997, with a mandate to continue the work of Beijing—in terms of education, information sharing, networking—and to make CEE countries visible in the U.N. system. Founding countries included Poland, Albania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Czech Republic, Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine, and Russia.

LEARNING DEMOCRACY SKILLS

Developing a Common Position and Building a Coalition

During a meeting in May 1999 in Bucharest, KARAT members decided to put forward recommendations for the regional and global preparatory conferences before the Special Session of the General Assembly in June 2000. Because of ongoing conflict in the Balkans, they determined that the region's recommendations had to address Women and Armed Conflict. Thus, women from 15 countries—including Bosnia, Croatia, Macedonia, and Yugoslavia (Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia)—gathered in Budapest in November 1999 to formulate a common position on the impact of the Balkan conflict on women.

Challenges: First, the mechanics of organizing the meeting, reaching women from the Balkans, and obtaining funding required hard work and cooperation. Because of their different ages and backgrounds, and since they came from a region still emerging from the legacies of socialism, the participants varied in their familiarity with democratic process and in their advocacy skills. During the Budapest meeting, they showed keen interest in building their skills and their strength to represent a constituency. Second, the women sought to identify what had been the impacts on them—including women and girls, and residents of conflict areas and of adjacent countries—to determine what had been learned beyond the experience reflected in the Women and Armed Conflict section of the Platform. It was difficult in a short period of time to share with new colleagues some of the traumas and horrors women have experienced and to use the experiences to develop a thoughtful political statement.

Accomplishments:

- **Developing a Common Position:** Through small group discussions and consensus building, the participants sought to articulate how they wanted to play greater roles in preventing conflict, seeking peace, and building new post-conflict societies, thus turning their individual experiences and concerns into a common platform.
- **Expanding the Network:** The KARAT Coalition gained additional members at the meeting in Budapest by building linkages between founding members and new colleagues from the Balkans.
- **Coalition Building:** The Budapest statement was an opportunity to build alliances with official delegates and with women from Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Gaining Regional Recognition and Support

At the ECE Regional Preparatory Conference in Geneva, women from Western Europe, Canada, and the United States came together with women from Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Russia during the NGO Forum and the official governmental meeting. The KARAT Coalition participated in the NGO Forum by organizing workshops on armed conflict, institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women, and women in power and decision making. KARAT members also took leadership in the caucuses on institutional mechanisms and armed conflict, and participated in those on violence against women, women and the economy, and trafficking in women and girls.

Challenges: First, the draft document for the Regional Preparatory Conference declared progress in implementing the Platform for Action throughout the ECE region, ignoring the circumstances faced by women from CEE. Second, these women were newcomers to a reunion of Americans and West Europeans. Third, they needed to establish legitimacy in the eyes of their own official delegates.

Accomplishments:

- **Gaining Visibility:** Alarmed by the draft document's failure to reflect their circumstances, within hours of their arrival in Geneva, the women from CEE formed a committee to draft a position statement. Within three days, they had agreed upon "A Statement from NGOs of CEE and CIS: Distinguishing Countries in Transition" and distributed copies to NGOs from Western Europe and the United States, and to all government delegates. The KARAT women learned

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From the Preamble to the Agreed Conclusions of the Regional Preparatory Meeting on the 2000 Review of Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.*

We recognize that countries with economies in transition and emerging democracies remain fragile and require special attention and support, particularly to address the disproportionate negative impacts of transition processes on women's lives and livelihoods, and we affirm the right and capacity of women from these countries to play an active part in leading and managing all of their countries' development and peace processes and the need to support them in doing so.

* E/ECE/RW.2/2000/L.3, 21 January 2000

quickly about the tensions between working fast and building consensus for articulating common positions quickly and effectively. This lesson will serve them well as they attempt to influence policies and legislation back home.

- **Building Alliances with Women from Western Europe to Lobby Official Delegates:** Transmitting the KARAT position on Women and Armed Conflict to official delegates required two approaches: informing and gaining allies. To inform, the women from the region—particularly the Balkans and the Caucasus—organized a workshop and co-led the thematic caucus. In addition, they collaborated with women from Western Europe, Canada, and the United States to draft “Recommendations on Rebuilding Peace: Priority of Women from Central and Eastern Europe and Commonwealth Independent States.” These alliances grew stronger throughout the Beijing +5 process.
- **Taking Leadership in Advising Policy Makers:** The women from CEE grasped several major opportunities to put their positions forward. First, they effectively responded to the unexpected opportunity to comment on the official document on Women and Armed Conflict in a meeting with the government delegates. Much of their input was incorporated into the final text. Second, they stepped forward when the Regional Preparatory Conference allowed six NGO representatives to speak in each of the four formal sessions. Women from Croatia, Macedonia, Yugoslavia, and Azerbaijan testified with regard to Women and Armed Conflict. Representatives from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Poland testified about Women and Decision-making and about Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women, respectively. Their powerful statements elicited positive responses from both official delegates and NGOs.

The visible and politically powerful result of this meeting was an excellent official U.N. document, agreed to by all member states of the ECE region, that reflects the needs of women in the CEE. Further, they initiated relations with women from Western Europe and the United States that not only were important for the next phases of Beijing +5 but also have laid the groundwork for future collaboration (including sharing information, transferring expertise, and gaining funding from the West).¹

¹ Both KARAT documents, “A Statement from NGOs of CEE and CIS: Distinguishing Countries in Transition” and “Rebuilding Peace: The Priority of Women from Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States” were included in the ECE NGO Working Session report, “NGOs As Partners, On the Way to Accelerate Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.”

One major KARAT accomplishment was that the women established their presence and capability, as well as articulated the needs and contributions of women in their region, for NGO and U.N. leaders.

“[A]t the Regional Preparatory Meeting in Geneva, we were delighted to see:

- So many KARAT women, (and those from the CIS countries, whom we did not know yet and who seemed also to be very active and interested),
- Organizing themselves . . . to take up positions and to start dialoguing with their governments,
- To take up individual responsibilities, e.g., convening the caucus on ‘Violence: Women and Girls in Armed Conflict’ or accepting to be nominated to the International NGO Coordinating Committee for Beijing +5, thus establishing an ongoing link from the sub-regional to the global level.”

“During the March Preparatory Meeting in New York, we saw in existence:

- A stronger and independent Eastern European Caucus . . . able to give its input at any opportunity
- An assertive [KARAT leader] who took her place in chairing meetings or NGO briefings with ease
- An easy way in which they dialogued or tried to influence their governments during the PrepCom.”

Renate Bloem, President, NGO Committee on the Status of Women; and Danielle Bridel, Chair, NGO Working Group on Women in ECE

“AS A MEMBER OF THE EUROPEAN WOMEN ACTION 2000 TEAM, I COULD LEARN AND PRACTICE DAY AFTER DAY HOW AN ‘E-GROUP’ WORKS; HOW DECISIONS ARE TAKEN WITHIN THE GROUP; AND HOW DIFFICULT IT CAN BE TO GET, PROVIDE, AND EXCHANGE INFORMATION. BUT ALSO I SAW THE RESULT OF OUR JOINT EFFORTS AND THE USE WOMEN COULD MAKE OF OUR SERVICES.”

ERZSEBET SZABO, HUNGARY

Formulating a Lobbying Strategy and Gaining Visibility at the Global Level

Having made their positions and needs felt on the regional level, the women from CEE next faced the global preparatory conference, bringing ECE NGOs and delegates together with representatives of Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Challenges: CEE representatives found it difficult to communicate with one another and to convene meetings. There was no central location for notices that was regularly accessible, entry to the U.N. building was difficult, and meetings were held concurrently in different buildings. Further, the integrated document, combining findings and recommendations from the preparatory regional and thematic meetings along with official reporting, was long and difficult to influence.

Accomplishments:

- **Maximizing Effectiveness by Focusing their Agenda:** Recognizing the scope of the 12 areas of concern and the difficulties of coordinating people, the women from CEE focused their leadership on four issues that have specific dynamics in CEE: women and girls in armed conflict, women and the economy, women in power and decision making, and institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women.² They developed their own recommendations for improving the Outcomes Document in four concise documents and used them to gain inclusion in thematic caucus position papers. In fact, the thematic caucus recommendations on

institutional mechanisms and on women and girls in armed conflict incorporated all of the CEE/CIS caucus recommendations.

- **Building Lobbying Skills:** Members of KARAT worked hard to learn more about lobbying. They lobbied with both their regional recommendations and with the issue-based caucus recommendations for several reasons: (1) to focus their government representatives on recommendations of particular importance to their region; (2) to show the effectiveness of the CEE NGOs in gaining recognition of their region's needs within a global process; and (3) to support the global, issue-based coalitions by lobbying their CEE official delegates for the full range of recommendations. KARAT and its colleagues distributed 500 copies of their position papers among government delegates and NGOs.
- **Using Multiple Media to Gain Visibility:** KARAT members articulated regional perspectives on panels and in the media. As a panelist at the Gender and Globalization caucus, a Bulgarian woman made a presentation on the social impacts of privatization on women. Yugoslav and Macedonian representatives spoke on a panel organized by the caucus on Women and Armed Conflict, which was attended by 50 people, including members of the Security Council. During a panel on women and economy,

“THE U.N. LEVEL WAS AN EXCELLENT EXPERIENCE FOR US BECAUSE WE LEARNED THAT WE WERE NOT ONLY LISTENED TO, BUT THAT OUR ‘VOICES’ ARE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT BY OTHER NGOS AND GOVERNMENTS. IT’S NOT THE PRACTICE IN OUR COUNTRIES.”

KINGA LOHMAN, POLAND

a Polish woman discussed the problem of trafficking in women.

One KARAT member was a member of the editorial board of Women Action *Daily News* and the European Women Action website. As a link to the KARAT concerns and initiatives, she ensured visibility and inclusion. In fact, not only news articles but also longer texts about the work of KARAT are available on the website.³

² While the CEE/CIS caucus decided not to take leadership on other issues, individuals from the region energetically joined the caucuses for issues such as reproductive health or the media as participants to ensure that their region's needs were represented and to lend their weight to the process.

³ The Women Action *Daily News* was distributed to NGOs and delegates every day during the meeting of the NGO Committee on the Status of Women; all issues are available on the Internet: <http://www.womenaction.org/>. The European section of the Women Action website also contains alternative reports of the KARAT member states and other information from the region.

Facing Opposition and Staying on Message

After all the preparations, June 2000 was to be the culminating event. Unfortunately, the final meeting and product disappointed many in terms of the public, visible goals. Yet, here again, women from CEE learned lessons about the democratic process.

Challenges: At this stage, the women from CEE encountered a major element of democratic process—dealing with a well-organized campaign to challenge the legitimacy of the Platform for Action, rather than focusing on its implementation.

Accomplishments:

- **Learning to Anticipate and Respond to Opposition:** KARAT women learned that open processes are, in fact, open—that is, that an opposition may join the process and present formidable challenges. If democracy provides a forum for people with one set of views, it is also a stage for others. Thus, there is a competitive element, a need to anticipate others' perspectives, and a need to develop skills and strategies to respond to them effectively by working the various levers of democratic process.

Further, KARAT women discovered the unifying nature of an outside threat—that as most NGOs and participants in Beijing +5 sought to repel efforts to renew debate about the platform itself, it required that they work together even more closely. The extent of connections, trust building, and collaboration among women from all over the world should not be underestimated as a significant product of the process.

From their experience at earlier meetings, the KARAT women had learned how to develop a strategy through discussion, building consensus and dividing responsibilities. They opted to produce their own political statement, addressing it particularly to their government delegates as a clear articulation of the NGO position on the subject. But they also produced a two-page statement that (1) reiterated their more-pressing needs (“Statement of Concerns”) and (2) put forward their expectations for support from governments and donors (“What We Want You to Do”).

- **Building Cooperative Relations with Government Representatives:** The women from CEE achieved a significant new phase as civil society in their region because they built collaborative relations with their government representatives. In such a global forum and on a subject for which the official delegates often required input and expertise, the NGOs earned respect and legitimacy. Although not true for all countries of the region, many NGO representatives met regularly with their government delegates.⁴ This is a very significant step for democracy back home: shifting from government defensiveness and distrust regarding civil society toward greater transparency and collaboration. On the NGO side, the process built their self-confidence and a spirit of positive engagement.

A Strategic Response to Threatening Opposition

In response to the conservative alliance, the women from CEE debated their priorities: Should they join a general NGO statement, or should they draft their own? Should they put all of their energy into combating this attack on women's rights, which would preclude other objectives? Or might they also focus on ensuring that their positions and needs were clearly articulated for governments and donors in the next five years—and on learning as much as they could about process and substance to take that back home to their national campaigns?

CONCLUSIONS

The experience of women from CEE demonstrates that beyond the U.N. forum and its final declarations, participation generated other benefits. Through this process, the women gained skills, perspectives, and experience that will serve them well in building democracy at home. Many learned more from doing than they would have learned from classroom-style workshops. In terms of self-confidence and leadership, they gained respect and experience. For their future work at home, they gained legitimacy with their own governments, built regional solidarity on shared experiences, established connections with women in the “West,” and achieved visibility before

⁴ In fact, as a result of NGO involvement in the preparatory process for Beijing +5, some governments included NGO representatives on their official delegations: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Moldova, and Slovakia.

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the donor community. With those accomplishments as foundations, they have achieved greater strength to pursue the objectives of the Beijing Platform for Action, including goals relating to poverty alleviation and democracy building.

Further, there are the obvious benefits of networking and information exchange. Since 1995, women have been working hard for change and have been trying new approaches. Studies regarding the impacts of globalization and privatization, efforts to stem trafficking of women and girls, new approaches to resource allocation and political power through “gender budgets,” are just a few of the important issues raised, shared, and debated through the process. Women from CEE have built long-lasting relationships with women from around the world—based not on e-mail correspondence or donor-required partnerships but on shared experience.

Finally, donors whose decisions are driven by demand have said they cannot support women from CEE if they do not know their needs. Those needs must be demonstrated and communicated. By becoming more focused and visible in the Beijing +5 process, the women from CEE have generated greater support for their initiatives—which should contribute to building equitable democracies and market economies in their home countries.

The women from CEE who participated in the Beijing +5 process are back home, where as members of civil society they are lobbying their governments to respect the rights of their citizens, to allocate resources for their needs, and to meet their obligations to their constituents. The stronger these women are, the better they can contribute to strengthening democracy on the national and local levels. Donors can always provide two- to three-day training courses, two- to three-week study tours, and two- to three-year stipends for degree programs. But this hands-on, real-life participation was an effective way for some committed citizens of CEE to gain facility with the mechanics of democratic processes.

SKILLS EXERCISED IN THE BEIJING +5 PROCESS

- Articulating a program, the circumstances, and the needs of an interest group
- Drafting a concise, powerful statement
- Building consensus among sub-regions (Central Europe, Eastern Europe, and the Balkans) to agree to four key issues
- Building coalitions by expanding a coalition or network and building links with other groups
- Organizing committees and assigning basic responsibilities
- Lobbying, within issue caucuses and with government delegates
- Collaborating with government representatives
- Testifying as expert spokespersons before government delegates and plenary sessions
- Networking and coalition building with women from Western Europe
- Responding to opposition
- Developing a focused strategy
- Assertively putting forward the CEE's position within regional statements

WIDTECH supports innovative approaches to technical assistance and training that take into account women's roles and contributions and enhance the effectiveness of USAID's development assistance.

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